

At Gray Knob, extreme

By Marty Basch
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

RANDOLPH, N.H. — The legend of Gray Knob would have temperatures at minus 30 and the punishing wind howling against the mountainside cabin. Visibility would be less than an arm's length as horizontal snow stung staggering hikers seeking respite from nature's rage.

Not so this relatively balmy late January day when the mercury dropped only to around 14 degrees. The brilliant blue sky was the ideal backdrop to the sparkling white of rime ice above treeline and the wind whispered by day. Inside the dark and minimalist shelter where cooking on portable stoves was done by headlamp, the temperature — even when the wood stove burned — was barely above freezing.

That's fine for those who revel in spartan backcountry comfort on a Mount Adams ridge at 4,375 feet in New Hampshire's northern Presidential Range. Since 1976, the 800-member northern New Hampshire Randolph Mountain Club has kept the two-level cabin just below treeline on the second highest White Mountain peak staffed year-round by caretakers. The nonprofit hiking organization oversees about 100 miles of trails in the northern Presidential and Crescent ranges around Randolph. Two winter caretakers are employed to oversee Gray Knob and other club cabins. Given the environmental extremes, it could be the coldest job around.

Though Mount Washington with its wicked winter reputation is less than a six-mile hike away, those who toil on that summit can retreat indoors to dorm-like comfort and continuous heat, electricity, and running water. Not so at Gray Knob. Due to a limited wood supply, the stove runs briefly when there are guests. There is no electricity, but a solar panel does recharge the battery-powered radio. Grill-sized propane cylinders are hiked up. And running water is from a spring about a quarter-mile away that needs to be chipped away at to prevent freezing.

Seven days on, seven off, the rotating caretakers make daily two-hour rounds by foot to other club cabins, keeping tabs on guests and making sure that the spring doesn't freeze. They could be called on to aid or report a search and rescue mission. Daily check-in with the club via radio is routine. So is

listening to the 7 a.m. Mount Washington weather forecast so that it can be posted in the cabin. Outhouse duty is theirs, too.

The caretakers are hardy, quirky souls, usually in their early 20s. Many go on to other outdoor-oriented careers. One caretaker, who held the job in his 60s, was the late outdoors writer Guy Watterman. The story goes that Watterman named 26 points of the trail he took to the cabin from A to Z so he wouldn't get bored. Pay for a caretaker is \$50 a day and all the leftovers you can eat.

On this day, RMC members Doug Mayer and Al Sochard, who hires the caretakers, accompanied me to Gray Knob along Lowe's Path from Randolph. Instead of a packed snow trail, the path was a thin layer of snow on ice. The brooks were running over brown ground. Crampons, those fangs for winter, were put on plastic, insulated mountaineering boots and pierced downed leaves and mud. It was more like late November than late January.

Lithe, young caretakers with loaded backpack make the 3.2-mile hike to the cabin in under two hours. A schlepper like me, stopping for lunch, did it in over three hours, slowing down considerably during the steep, ice-choked pitches.

Though the conditions were less than ideal, the blue sky and short evergreens told us treeline was near. At the Quay, a rock outlook near the cabin, the panorama was glorious with the Randolph Valley below and Vermont's peaks to the west, Mahoosuc to the east, the Killkenny and Presidential ranges all out there. On the right day, life above treeline is dazzling and this was one of them.

Lowe's Path continues up Mount Adams, but we did not. Gray Knob was less than a minute away on Nowell Ridge, between deep King and Cascade ravines. In the shadows, it was lighter outside than inside the wooden cabin, first perched there in 1905 and then rebuilt in 1989 after falling to disrepair. Gray Knob is used largely by hikers who are continuing on to the summits of area peaks like Adams, Madison, and Jefferson. It operates within the White Mountain National Forest on a special use permit from the US Forest Service.

A pair of Quebec students coming down from Mount Madison were using the cabin as a lunch

If you go . . .

Randolph Mountain Club

PO Box 279, Gorham
www.randolphmountainclub.org
Overnight at Gray Knob and Crag Camp \$12, The Perch and Log Cabin \$7; all first come, first served.

Moriah Sports

101 Main St., Gorham
603-466-5050
Get gear here Tuesday-Saturday 9 a.m. to 5 p.m.

Lowe's Store

908 U.S. Route 2, Randolph
603-466-3950
Last-minute stop for supplies and \$1 a day parking. Daily 7 a.m. to 7 p.m.

Libby's Bistro

115 Main St., Gorham
603-466-5330
Post-trip treat. Wednesday-Saturday 5:30-9 p.m. \$7-\$25.

stop, one cooking away while the other found the house guitar and sang Cat Stevens and Beatles songs. Many use it as a base camp. Husband and wife Darrin Kelly and Megan Gahl of Gouldsboro, Maine, were planning on summiting Mount Adams at 5,799 feet the next day. At the cabin, they could rest and get an early start, lightening their load by leaving nonessential gear behind and retrieving it on the descent. The cabin sees its share of first-time winter hikers, seasoned veterans, groups, and those led by professional guides. And there are always stories.

Up on a day hike was Mike Micucci who runs a Gorham sports shop. He recalled his winter as a caretaker in the late '70s. One day he was cooking soup when the propane ran out. He had to hike down the mountain in subzero temperatures, get a ride to the store, buy propane, find a lift back and trek to the cabin. "That cup of soup took six hours to cook," he said.

Darkness and cold are frequent winter companions. Winter caretakers spend lots of time in sleeping bags, reading and drinking hot liquids. Some nights, the 15-person-capacity cabin is filled. It can also be days between guests, days and nights filled with solitude.

Ryan Harvey, 23, is one of the winter caretakers, the season extending from November to March.

s in work and play



MARTY BASCH FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Darrin Kelly and Megan Gahl, of Gouldsboro, Maine, head up to Gray Knob for the night.

He's a bit of a backwoods ambassador, dispensing local weather, terrain, and snow conditions. Seven-
een below was the coldest he
recorded as of that day and he ad-
mitted that hikers try to coax him
to keep that wood stove going
longer. The wood, which is cut
power down on the mountain and
hailed up during non-snow

months by caretakers and the
club's summer trail crew, is
burned sparingly. "You look at wa-
ter and cooking differently," Har-
vey said. "When things spill, they
freeze instantly."

Warmth is different as well. In-
side, hats and gloves are on. Mul-
tiple socks are worn. Dinner with
down jackets is common. Streams

of heat emanate from hikers just
in off the trail. For many, bedding
down for the night comes just af-
ter 8 p.m., a welcome break from
winter's freezing breath.

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